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*W. McEachlan*

# The First Mohawk Primer

— by —

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THE  
FIRST MOHAWK  
PRIMER



THE beginning of educational as well as religious training among the aboriginal races on this continent has been almost altogether the work of missionaries. So we find it to have been the case among the Iroquois, and yet those who first ministered to them were not the English, with whom they were more intimately associated, but the Jesuits who came to them as early as 1642. While they confined their attention mainly to the Onondagas and Cayugas, Père Bruyas preached among the Mohawks at intervals from 1667 to 1701. During this time he prepared a Mohawk grammar, a small lexicon and a catechism, but these remained in manuscript only until 1865, when



they were published by Mr. J. G. Shea of New York. These precious manuscripts now at Caughnawaga were shown to the members of the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society during its excursion to that place in 1906.

The English mission to the Mohawks, undertaken by the Society for Promoting the Gospel in Foreign Parts, was commenced in 1704 when the Rev. Thoroughgood Moor was sent out from England to work among them; but his ministrations not proving acceptable he soon left and went to New Jersey where he got into a serious difficulty by declining the communion to the governor for which he was imprisoned. Escaping he fled to Massachusetts.

But before Moor's appointment the Rev. Benardus Freeman, minister to the Dutch Reformed Congregation at Schenectady, where he had been settled five years, had given a great deal of study to the Mohawk language and occasionally preached in it. When, in 1700, this fact came to the knowledge of the Earl of Bellomont he employed Freeman to convert the Indians. From 1700 to 1705 he translated into Mohawk "Morning and Evening and other Prayers" and several books of the Old and New Testament. None of these have ever been credited to him although they formed the foundation of all later translations. Some of them were undoubtedly his work unrevised.

One would imagine that the first literary production in a language newly reduced to writing would be a book destined to help the teaching of that lan-



guage ; but such is rarely the case. Religious instructors true to their calling boldly launch out into religious works such as a selection of prayers a catechism or translations of portions of the Holy Scriptures. Thus it was that in 1707 the first book in Iroquois was printed in Boston by Bartholomew Green under the title : " Another tongue brought in to confess the Great Saviour of the world or, some communications of Christianity put into a tongue used by the Iroquois Indians of America." This publication is a mystery to American historians as to who could have been its author and why a book intended for the Indians of Western New York should have been printed in Boston. On carefully looking into the matter they have been forced to the conclusion that Freeman was really the author. When Moor was appointed over the Mohawks, Freeman, to help in the work, gave him such of his translations as were thought to be necessary for the religious instructions he was about to undertake. On leaving, Moor carried them away with him and when in Boston showed them to Increase Mather a zealous promoter of Indian missions who decided to have them printed. The title savours of Mather's style.

In 1712 the Society for Promoting the Gospel sent out another missionary in the person of the Rev. Wm. Andrews, who preached to the Indians through Lawrence Cleasse the official interpreter. But he felt the want of written prayers and scriptures in the

language so application was made to Freeman who handed over the whole of his Mohawk translations to the Society. Selections from these were edited by Cleasse and printed at New York in 1715 under the title "Morning and Evening Prayer the Litany, Church Catechism family prayers and several chapters of the Old and New Testament translated by Lawrence Cleasse, interpreter to Wm. Andrews." In 1762 there remained only one or two perfect copies of this first edition of the Mohawk prayer book, so Sir Wm. Johnson asked the Rev. Dr. Barclay to prepare a new one. In 1763 it was placed in the hands of William Weyman to be printed, but, as this printer shows, he experienced great difficulties in setting it up. His ordinary font suitable for English proved altogether deficient in its supply of Gs, Ks, Ys & Cs for Iroquois composition in which language, by the way, there are only seventeen letters. Very often these letters ran out before a single page had been set up. So the work progressed slowly as it had to be sent to press in forms of a single page. In the meantime, Dr. Barclay died whereupon Weyman wrote to Johnson complaining that the copy from which he was setting was very imperfect and "that a gentleman had a perfect one who I was told is your son or one by the name of Claus who is at Quebec, Montreal or some distant part". As the perfect prayer book could not then be had Weyman had to struggle along unaided with the imperfect one until 1766 when the Rev. J. Ogilvie of Trinity



Church, a former Mohawk missionary, was appointed to supervise the printing. In 1768, when Weyman died, the book was still unfinished. It was taken up and issued in 1769 by Hugh Gain whose imprint it bears although he only printed the final forms and bound up the sheets that had been printed by Weyman so long before.

It does not appear that the Jesuits had, up to this time, attempted to print any of their translations and other manuscripts for use in their missions. There was no press in Canada and as we have just seen the intricacies of the Iroquois tongue were such that they could not send their work to be printed in France without personally accompanying it to see to the proof reading on the spot. Hitherto all teaching among this people, both by the English and French Missionaries, was oral and by means of manuscripts. They had no printed "lesson books."

But with the advent of the press in Canada and especially at Montreal came a change. The Jesuit missionaries finding it difficult to keep a converted Iroquois converted if he were allowed to associate with his heathen brethren, early sought to segregate their converts. For this purpose the mission at Caughnawaga was founded where the converts were brought together. From this fact the Caughnawagas were called by the English the praying Indians. There Père Bruyas' manuscripts were deposited and used when occasion required in teaching the people to read. But this teaching by manuscript was so slow

that on the advent of a press at Montreal the missionary determined to print an A. B. C. or a first lesson book, in fact a primer—the first Mohawk primer shall we say.

This is an excessively rare book as only one copy is known and that is in the library of the Historical Society of Wisconsin at Madison. No other record has come to us regarding it, except that in Mesplet's post-mortem inventory an item mentions 16 prières sauvages. It was no doubt edited from the Bruyas' manuscript although no author's name or any other information is given by Pilling. It is a very small brochure of sixteen 16mo. pages, and is printed altogether in Iroquois even to Mesplet's name which is spelled 8esklet. As the letters M. and P. are wanting in the language the former is replaced by an 8 which in French Iroquois does duty for a sound represented by W. in English Iroquois and the latter by K.

When the war broke out with the thirteen colonies it was found necessary to draw the Indians closer to the British interests, more especially by providing for them religious services and instruction. When therefore it was learned that, on their removal to Canada, only a few copies of the prayer book of 1769 remained among the Indians, and as that was full of typographical and other errors it was determined

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(1) Bibliography of the Iroquoian languages, Washington, 1888, page 30.



to prepare a new and corrected edition at the expense of the Government. General Haldimand the Governor gave orders for it to be revised and printed under the supervision of Colonel Daniel Claus, Indian agent at Montreal.

No more capable man for such work could be found. O'Callaghan claims that he was "most probably a native of the Mohawk valley where in early life he acquired a knowledge of the Iroquois language"; (2) on the other hand in a note to a report of a conference, held between Major General Johnson and the Indians at Mount Johnson on the 21st of June, 1755, it is stated that: "This speech was translated and wrote by Mr. Daniel Claus a German Gentleman of Education who hath lived for some time among the Indians of the upper Mohawk Castle in order to make himself acquainted with their language". (3) Johnson found him so proficient in Iroquois that he appointed him to his staff with the rank of Lieutenant in the American Rangers. He was afterwards advanced to a captaincy in the 60th and finally raised to the rank of Colonel. After the cession of Canada, he was appointed deputy Indian agent at Montreal at a salary of £200. His position as member of his staff brought him into contact with Sir William Johnson's daughter, whom he married.

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(2) Documents relating to the Colonial History of New York, Vol. VIII, page 815.

(3) *Ibid*, Vol. VI, 964.

This is why printer Weyman when writing to Sir William styled him "your son". His relationship with the Johnsons led him to join the loyalist section and come to Canada with the Indians whereupon he was appointed Indian agent with headquarters at Montreal. In 1772, he visited England and while there, wrote a long memorandum to the under secretary as to the proper treatment of the Indians. Although his services were highly appreciated by Haldimand Carleton looked with distrust upon him. Thus it came about that after the close of the war, he returned to England where he died in 1787. His wife survived him thirteen years, dying in Canada in 1801.

On receiving his instructions, Claus set to work on the revision of the prayer book but so numerous were the blunders and so many were the improvements made that it became in his hands practically a new work. So much was it improved, that, as he writes, the Indians were so delighted with it, they were anxious to learn to read so as to be able to use it themselves.

The printing of this book was entrusted to William Brown of Quebec who experienced the same difficulties in setting it up as did Weyman with the second edition. And Claus, determined to turn out an acceptable book, remained at Quebec correcting the proof and watching it through the press. But his official duties calling him to Montreal, the proofs had to be sent there to him with the weekly



mail. This proving too slow and uncertain, Claus again went to Quebec to supervise the final forms and see the finish. The edition was one of a thousand copies for which Brown charged the government £95.10.0 equal to \$475. This price 47½ cents a copy does not seem out of the way for a volume of 208 octavo pages.

Now about the "first" or shall we say second primer which is entitled : " A Primer for the use of the Mohawk children to acquire the spelling and Reading of their own : As well as to got acquainted with the English tongue which for that purpose is put on the opposite page". As this was printed at Mesplet's press in 1781, it appeared a mystery to me seeing that Mesplet was at that time a state prisoner at Quebec. How could he print a book in Montreal ? I thought there might be some mistake in the date, but was able to verify this from existing copies as well as by Pilling where the book is described with a fac-simile of the title page; (4) but with no particulars as to the name of its author or the circumstances under which it was printed. Believing that a clue to this mystery was to be found somewhere, I set to work to solve it by first going over the whole of the three index volumes of the Haldimand papers. On my second trial, I came across a letter from Colonel Daniel Claus, which I believed, could help me. On securing a copy from Ottawa, it gave the inform-

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(4) Bibliography of the Iroquoian Languages, pages 137-138.

ation wanted. An item in the letter informed Haldimand : "That the Indians were so pleased with the new prayer book that in his leisure hours he (Claus) had prepared a Mohawk primer the *first* they have ever had by which they could more readily learn their own language as well as acquire a knowledge of English and thus become good interpreters." He goes on to say that they like the little book and that he had already received orders for a supply from the Indians of the Niagara district.

From this we may conclude that while Claus was engaged in revising the prayer book, he noticed the great need there was for a primer, and the difficulties with which teachers and missionaries had to contend as is shown in Stewart's Memoir. "Some idea of the difficulties attendant in imparting elementary instruction to the Indians in those days may be formed from the circumstance that the teacher had no elementary books. Paulus and the other Mohawk teachers taught the alphabet &c., by means only of little manuscript scraps of paper. It was not until several years after that Col. Claus composed his short primer for them." (5)

Here then we have the name of the author which Pilling had not learned and knowing that we arrive at the following conclusions.

When Mesplet was arrested and taken to Quebec in June 1779, his press and type were seized by

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(5) Documentary History of New York, Vol. IV, page 208.



Major Nairn in command at Montreal, and a rough inventory taken, but from all we can learn nothing further was done with it. After his release in September 1782, Mesplet returned to his old stand on Capital street, and printed that same year a "Psautier". From this, we may safely conclude that the press and type was held under seizure during the whole of the time that Mesplet was detained in prison. When therefore Claus determined to print the Primer he had compiled, seeing he could not absent himself from his duties, he bethought him of Mesplet's idle press, at Montreal, and engaging a young printer, probably at Quebec had the work printed thereon. He acted no doubt as manager, proof reader and even as devil. The whole get up of the book shows that it lacked the care of the master hand; for slips occur in the pagination and in the making up of the forms.

It is a small square 12mo. book of nearly a hundred pages with the title in English and Mohawk and in the body of the work, Mohawk to the right and English to the left throughout 65 pages. First come two pages of letters, then words of one, two and more syllables, up to eight and ten and even longer from page 4 to 18. From 19 to 32 is a short scripture catechism. From 33 to 65 is a church catechism. From 65 to 70, there are miscellaneous questions from an old manuscript by the first missionaries (most likely Freeman's). Then come prayers in Mohawk only up to page 91. The last six pages is taken up with a list of the books of the Bible and

with Mohawk numerals, &c. The imprint states that the book was "printed at Fleury Mesplet's" which clearly proves that while his press gets the credit, Mesplet had no part in printing this precious volume.

There are three copies known, one in the British Museum, one in Brooklyn and the other in New York. The latter in the collection of Mr. Wilberforce Eames of the Lenox Library. It is to be regretted that no specimen of this, the first two attempts of Iroquois printing in Montreal can be found in our libraries. I herewith append a cutting from a catalogue to show how much it is held in estimation elsewhere as the price asked for it was \$900.

### EARLIEST KNOWN EDITION OF THE MOHAWK PRIMER

INDIANS. MOHAWK. A Primer for the use of the Mohawk Children. To acquire the Spelling and Reading of their own: As well as to get acquainted with the English Tongue which for that purpose is put on the opposite Page. Square 12mo, original calf, in morocco case. \$900.00.

Montreal. Printed at Fleury, Mesplets, 1781.

One of the rarest books of its period and one of three known copies. Lowndes describes the book and Brunet cites from Lowndes. He is no doubt mistaken in saying a copy was in possession of Mr. Lenox. There is none at present in the Lenox Library.

Pilling reproduced the title page and made his descriptions from the copy in the British Museum, at that time (1888) the only known copy.

A second copy was discovered in England in 1890, and passed through our hands into a New York private library. The copy described above was recently brought to light in San Francisco.

The book is rudely printed. A blank page (recto of C.) is not included in the pagination, the odd pages from 19 to end are therefore on the recto. A similar mistake seems to have been made in printing the first leaf of Sig. D. The recto of D1 is apparently blank, page 32 (which should be there printed) being on a separate leaf, pasted down. This point is not noted by Pilling or Sabin.

This copy belonged to Gonnagerid Aonghnadi Aoghyadonsera whose name, with the date April 30, 1785, is on the fly-leaf. There is other writing in Mohawk (?) on the black fly-leaf and inside of back cover, with the dates 1790, 1796 and 1802.

The condition of this copy will satisfy the most fastidious collector.

Thus we have actually two first Mohawk primers both printed at Montreal on Mesplet's press, and both well entitled to the first place as one was for Mohawks under French influence and the other for those under English rule, each with a different value and construction of the letters adopted. From these few facts we learn that Montreal, although away behind other cities of the continent in the introduction of printing, takes first place in the introduction of lesson books among the great Iroquoian race.

























